

Is your home safe from wildfire?

MIKE CAGGIANO

SCMRC Community Forester

Some residents may be surprised to know that if a large wildfire incident occurs close to their home there is a strong likelihood it will not be protected by a fire engine or local firefighting resource.

Nationally, the recommended ratio of resources to homes during wildfire incidents is 1:1. A rural area like Lincoln County has fewer resources and may hope to expect 1 engine for every 4 homes. On small wildfires this is sometimes possible.

Unfortunately during large wildfires, especially during the initial attack phase before national resources arrive on scene, it is often not possible. The Little Bear Fire threatened thousands of homes, and burned the majority of its acreage during a single burn period. In the confusion and chaos that occurs when a fire blows up like this one

there in the time of need. As a wildland firefighter working the Little Bear Fire, I passed by homes I thought were in good shape only later to discover that an unseen flame or ember must have ignited the home, possibly through the deck, windows, or eaves. As a resident of our community that is difficult for me to process, but as a firefighter, with limited resources on an incident we must focus our efforts where we think they will be most beneficial.

Local, state, and federal resources have been trained to conduct structural triage when a large number of homes are threatened and resources are limited. This involves a rapid assessment of each home, which places the home into one of three categories, defensible stand alone, defensible with assistance, or indefensible. Often firefighters will focus their attention on homes that can be defend-

are prohibited from putting out structure fires. Some departments have both types of training, but not all. The Wildland firefighter's primary goal is to stop the forward progress of the fire then deal with fire approaching homes. On a large incident, some resources are specifically tasked with structure protection and others are delegated to the wildland fire itself.

In the wildland urban interface, firefighters must make hard decisions on which homes to protect, and in some cases firefighters only have minutes to try and prepare a home before the fire reaches it.

Moving wood furniture off the deck, or putting down a water hose might be possible, but moving a cord of wood from under the deck, and then breaking out a lawn mower to cut knee high grass surrounding the home is not likely to occur.

did, homes and entire neighborhoods can be passed by because resources are needed elsewhere.

Across the west, fires are getting larger and larger each year, and the reality is we have thousands of homes in the wildland urban interface in Lincoln County and between engines and hand crews no more than about 60 local resources. On a fire like the Little Bear most homes may not see a fire engine, or if they do, resources may not be

ed with minimal risk to the firefighters and have at least some defensible space. We are trained to focus our efforts on homes that seem likely to survive with a bit of help.

Many factors go into making this decision, such as type of construction of the home, defensible space, hazards around the home, unobstructed escape route and house location in relation to slope and fire behavior. Also keep in mind that wildland firefighters are not structure-trained and

Residents can increase the chances of their homes surviving by taking action ahead of time, cutting trees, cleaning the gutters, and mowing the lawn.

Taking these actions will encourage firefighters to protect your home, and make it better able to stand alone in the case where resources are unavailable or engaged elsewhere.

For more on this story, visit us online at www.ruidosonews.com